

# Ugly Beauty

*Everyone caught the knife by the blade*

*by Shekhar Deshpande*

"There are two ways of catching a knife," goes a saying, "either by the handle or by the blade." It seems that everyone involved in the Miss World "beauty queen" contest seems to have caught a flying knife by the blade. The bleeding is likely to continue for a while.

First, the Amitabh Bachchan Corp. and its central semi-god wanted to cash in on a lucrative financial deal, with little more social conscience than a pimp, oblivious to the true nature of beauty contests.

In the Western world, beauty contests have come under fire from feminists. The organizers have shrewdly shifted the venues to exotic locations to display female flesh along with whatever other natural bounty that could be commodified under the guise of tourism. Unlike the Olympics or the Asian Games, beauty contests do not own up any glorious past in the name of anything except a quick buck and insatiable desires to make women compete while we enjoy their degradation.

Bachchan has become a talented businessman. While he expressed a desire to "negotiate" with the protesters at the last minute, no doubt from fear and surprise at the unexpected wrath of his own audiences, he must have calculated, as they all do, that some protest would be good publicity for his clever enterprise. The show itself, typical in livening up the dead past with images of India that even picture postcards no longer carry, was a tawdry representation of the limits of his talents and the reach of his cheap ambitions.

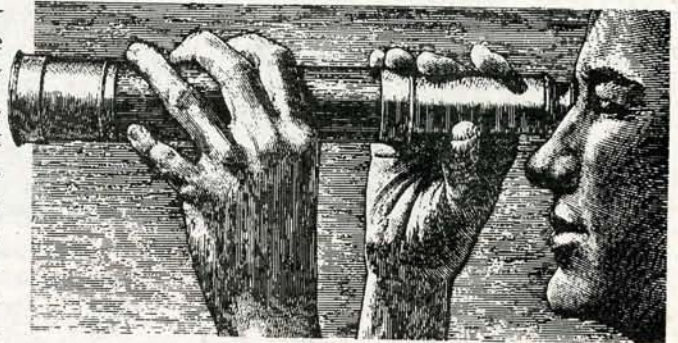
All the excuses that he offered — promoting tourism, claiming competence in organizing a large scale of event,

etc. — could be offered by anyone, except perhaps the Taliban executioners in Afghanistan.

With a couple of exceptions, the contestants, including Miss India Rani Jayraj, demonstrated their utter incompetence, almost in a culturally genetic way, in comprehending the situation. The well-known wisdom is that the talent contest for these women is not in hard questions on geography, but in non-questions that school children worth their parents' money would find humiliating.

This is not to say that these women are stupid or that they represent incompetence. Their worth is measured only in anatomical dimensions and perhaps in stylized, ideological social mannerisms. As human beings, their talents don't count. None of them can tell a story, except in a few mushy sentences. None of them is asked to show their human qualities, except their value in optical caressing and sexual fantasies for the pleasures of male viewers. To say that there is any dignity left in these beauty pageants is to insult the concepts of dignity and beauty, let alone the conceptual and relational violence they inflict on women in general.

Ah, the protesters! What happens to these fiery brands when real social issues are burning up people's lives? Self-immolation (tragic and accidental



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in some news accounts as the person wasn't prepared to face the flames all the way) is a strong statement, not appropriate for the land of non-violence and civil disobedience.

The protest was fueled by the "nationalist" Bharatiya Janata Party, whose interest in women's dignity might better be reflected in its political platform on the need to eradicate dowry, domestic abuse, harassment of workers and fair wages and jobs for women. Why would they want to utilize the Amitabh Bachchan media machine to show their concern on women's issues?

Sure the beauty pageants are degrading to women, but there are a host of other conditions that are more degrading, where these protesters might focus their attention. Of course, we are not suggesting that because there are bigger causes, that makes such protests less useful; but if the organizers or the powers-that-be felt the force of the engine thundering on the tracks all the time, such events would not take place, or their protests would have more serious impact.

One of the most bizarre and odd circumstances in the protest drama has to do with the language of violence. This seems to be the most violent protest against the beauty pageant ever, but it is violent also in the way that it associates in the public mind violence as a women's strategy. If the patriarchal pigs (no pun, we are serious) have to get any lesson, it is that women's peaceful ways of thinking could make everyday lives of men miserable. The peaceful and sustained public protest against injustices could have a more devastating effect than a few flashes of protest or threats of additional violence.

The Western media, in the meantime, had a field day with the drama. Along with the worst mid-air collision, this news captivated the media newsmakers. Curious and salivating at each strange gesture of all players in the Miss World contest, the media reaffirmed all the stereotypes of India and Indians. Bachchan would do well to use



Protesters marching against the Miss World contest. Photo AP.

his surplus wealth to control and affect this publicity machine.

Not one media outlet (and we stand corrected if readers point out otherwise) provided this news in the context of similar protests in the United States and Western Europe. The strong and often graphic protests against beauty pageants by women in this country, were dismissed by the media as oddities in an otherwise hospitable environment. And the protests in India were presented as typical of the rationality that governs that culture; self-immolation, suicide threats, terrorism all became characteristic, and not exceptional circumstances.

The media coverage offers a textbook example of the manufacturing of stereotypes with emphasis on select oddballs, lack of contextualization and vague representations that encourage vast generalizations. It were as if such protests could take place in a really odd place that does not offer women individual dignity and human rights.

Little do we realize that such protests now combine the fuel of anger against the new exploitation of women in advertising as much as humiliation of women in poverty-stricken and tradition-ridden conditions.

Is a reenactment of this drama possible by imagining all the players utilizing the opportunity of this event to make all the points they want to make, by holding the knife by the handle?

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